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| |  |  | | --- | --- | | Posted 12/7/2010 2:55 PM | [Comments 335](http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2010-12-07-us-students-international-ranking_N.htm#uslPageReturn) | [Recommend 51](javascript:void('Recommend')) | | |  |  | | --- | | **In ranking, U.S. students trail global leaders** | |
| |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | | [South Korean students, seen Nov. 18 in Seoul, scored among the highest in the world on the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment. The United States' highest ranking was 14th.](javascript:;) | | http://i.usatoday.net/_common/_images/clear.gif | | [Enlarge imageEnlarge](javascript:;) | By Chung Sung-Jun | | http://i.usatoday.net/_common/_images/clear.gif | | | South Korean students, seen Nov. 18 in Seoul, scored among the highest in the world on the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment. The United States' highest ranking was 14th. | |  | | |   **The Associated Press**  [United States](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Countries/United+States) students are continuing to trail behind their peers in a pack of higher performing nations, according to results from a key international assessment. Scores from the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment to be released Tuesday show 15-year-old students in the U.S. performing about average in reading and science, and below average in math. Out of 34 countries, the U.S. ranked 14th in reading, 17th in science and 25th in math.  Those scores are all higher than those from 2003 and 2006, but far behind the highest scoring countries, including [South Korea](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Countries/South+Korea), [Finland](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Countries/Finland) and [Singapore](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Towns,+Cities,+Counties/Singapore), [Hong Kong](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Towns,+Cities,+Counties/Hong+Kong) and [Shanghai](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Towns,+Cities,+Counties/Shanghai) in [China](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Countries/China) and [Canada](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Places,+Geography/Countries/Canada).  "This is an absolute wake-up call for America," U.S. Education Secretary [Arne Duncan](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/People/Politicians,+Government+Officials,+Strategists/Executive/Arne+Duncan) said in an interview with The Associated Press. "The results are extraordinarily challenging to us and we have to deal with the brutal truth. We have to get much more serious about investing in education."  The PISA exam is one of a handful of tests that compare educational levels across nations, and is considered to be the most comprehensive. The test focuses on how well students are able to apply their knowledge in math, reading and science to real-life situations. Some 470,000 students took the test in 2009 in 65 countries and educational systems, from poor, underdeveloped nations to the most wealthy.  Student performance on international assessments is considered especially relevant as today's high school graduates enter a global job market, where highly skilled workers are in increasing demand.  The United States' mediocre scores on the PISA exam have repeatedly been highlighted by the Obama administration and others pushing for education reform. A number of countries have made significant improvements in recent years, while the U.S. has made only incremental advancements.  Between 1995 and 2008, for example, the United States slipped from ranking second in college graduation rates to 13th, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Paris-based organization that develops and administers the PISA exam. Of 34 [OECD](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Organizations/International+Agencies,+Alliances,+Cartels/Organisation+for+Economic+Co-operation+and+Development) countries, only 8 have a lower high school graduation rate.  Responding to the grim figures, President Obama has set a goal for the U.S. to have the highest proportion of students graduating from college in 2020.  "We live in a globally competitive knowledge based economy, and our children today are at a competitive disadvantage with children from other countries," Duncan said. "That is absolutely unfair to our children and that puts our country's long term economic prosperity absolutely at risk."  The impact of improving math, reading and science scores could be radical: A recent OECD study with [Stanford University](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/Organizations/Schools/Stanford+University) projected that if the U.S. boosted its average PISA scores by 25 points over the next 20 years, there would be a gain of $41 trillion in the U.S. economy over the lifetime of the generation born in 2010.  The 2009 exam had an extra focus on reading, and looked at how factors such as family background, equity of resources, and governance influence educational outcomes.  The top performers in reading were South Korea, Finland, Hong Kong and Shanghai in China, Singapore, Canada, New Zealand, Japan and Australia.  The gap between the highest performing countries and the United States is stark — students in Shanghai, for example, had an average score of 556 points in reading, 56 points higher than the 500-point average reached by United States students. Shanghai students also posted the highest score in math, with an average of 600 points, 113 points higher than the 487 point U.S. average.  OECD Secretary-General [Angel Gurria](http://content.usatoday.com/topics/topic/People/Politicians,+Government+Officials,+Strategists/World+Leaders/Jose+Angel+Gurria) cited ongoing evaluations, an emphasis on the importance of education, and a curriculum that is relevant to everyday life as reasons for the Chinese success.  "They don't only produce children who know the matters by heart," Gurria said. "They're educated to understand and face the challenges of real life."  He noted that the Chinese scores were strong in all three subject areas.  "That speaks about who is going to be leading tomorrow," Gurria said.  *Copyright 2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.* |